

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 72 | Number 3 (Summer 2013)

pps. 294-295

Light on the Prairie: Solomon D. Butcher, Photographer of Nebraska's Pioneer Days

Kate Elliott
Luther College

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2013 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use,
not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Elliott, Kate. "Light on the Prairie: Solomon D. Butcher, Photographer of Nebraska's
Pioneer Days." *The Annals of Iowa* 72 (2013), 294-295.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1724>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](http://iowa-research-online.org)

Reviewer Millie K. Frese is the education and outreach manager at the State Historical Museum of Iowa. As the former editor of the *Goldfinch*, the State Historical Society of Iowa's children's magazine, she edited an issue on the orphan trains.

In her debut novel for middle-grade readers, Iowa City author Ethel Barker tells an orphan train story from the perspectives of three New York City street children. In July 1880 a "street rat" named Pete befriends two recently orphaned sisters, Iris and Rosie. A mumblety-peg lesson leads to an encounter with police and placement in an orphanage. From there, "the Reverend" invites them to board a train bound for rural Iowa. (Readers familiar with orphan train history will recognize later references to "Reverend Brace" as allusions to Charles Loring Brace, founder of the Children's Aid Society, whose emigration plan for destitute children eventually became known as "the orphan trains.") Barker's characters are placed in separate homes: Pete with a cruel farmer, Iris with an older couple who need a housekeeper, and Rosie with a wealthy—but unhappily married—couple. Chapters are narrated by alternating characters, but their voices are indistinguishable, often sounding more like an adult reminiscing about the distant past. Barker weaves a tale that "is almost too strange to be believed," to borrow a line from one of her characters.

A *Palimpsest* article, "The Orphan Train Comes to Clarion" (Fall 1988), piqued Barker's interest in this topic. From 1854 to 1929, charitable organizations removed poor children from New York City (not all were orphans), transporting an estimated 200,000 to new homes in "western" states. Approximately 8,000–10,000 children landed in Iowa. Young readers interested in learning more should look up *The Goldfinch* magazine's spring 2000 issue devoted to orphan trains in Iowa history.

Light on the Prairie: Solomon D. Butcher, Photographer of Nebraska's Pioneer Days, by Nancy Plain. Bison Books. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 113 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. \$16.95 paper.

Reviewer Kate Elliott is assistant professor of art history at Luther College. Her research and writing have focused on Western American art.

As Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series enters its eightieth year of publication, it is clear that the story of the American pioneer continues to enthrall young readers. No stranger to the genre of young adult non-fiction herself, Nancy Plain adds to the story of pioneer perseverance with her beautifully illustrated examination of

Solomon Butcher, the self-described “pioneer photographer of the Nebraska prairie.”

Plain offers scholars little new on Solomon Butcher’s ambitious 20-year project documenting the sodbusters of Custer County, Nebraska, finally published in 1901. She offers a slightly difference narrative—one of a failed farmer turned historian—that augments the expected narrative of the hearty pioneer transforming inhospitable prairie into fertile farmland.

Like Butcher, Plain highlights individuals with particularly interesting stories throughout her text. But this biographical approach is deftly situated within historical context such as Zebulon Pike’s 1806 assessment of the region as the “Great American Desert.” She also includes a valuable discussion of the transformational impact of the railroad on the settlement of the prairie. These historical events are laid out in a conversational tone, sprinkled with recollections of pioneers and illustrated with Butcher’s delightful photographs, creating anything but another dry historical text.

Problems with layout, especially the lack of figure numbers, make the text confusing at times, but this is a minor problem. *Light on the Prairie* serves as a model of how a book for young readers can educate as well as delight.

Buffalo Bill from Prairie to Palace, by John M. Burke, edited by Chris Dixon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xxvii, 367 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

The Life of Hon. William F. Cody, Known as Buffalo Bill, by William F. Cody, edited by Frank Christianson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. xlix, 529 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$27.95 paper.

The Wild West in England, by William F. Cody, edited by Frank Christianson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xli, 207 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$17.95 paper.

Reviewer J. Thomas Murphy is professor of history at Bemidji State University. His research and writing have focused on the military history of the U.S. West.

Citing his birth in Scott County, Iowa, in 1846, William F. Cody called it his “début upon the world’s stage” (*Life*, 19). It was a self-conscious statement. By the time he published his autobiography in 1879, his persona as Buffalo Bill—hunter, scout, Indian fighter—had been established in newspaper accounts, dime novels, and theatrical performances. Cody was a striver, seeking opportunity wherever he could.